Climate Refugees: The Unseen Victims of Climate Change and Displacement

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Muhammad Salman August 23, 2025

The term climate change refugees has recently been used for the new displacees in an increasingly warming and degraded world. It reflects those people who are compelled to flee their homes while facing adverse natural events or due to slow-onset climatic impacts, such as rising sea levels, intensified droughts, or even slow-onset storms having a gradual and subtle impact. Migration due to climate change has recently received a lot of attention, but unfortunately, current international legal and policy instruments fall woefully short of ensuring the protection of this vulnerable population.

Science agrees that displacement due to climate change will come from desertification, reduction in water supply, deterioration of agricultural productivity, and a number of natural disasters, such as cyclones, floods, and fires. The most affected are low coastal areas, notably in the Pacific Islands, South Asia, and certain parts of Africa. Already, small island nations suffer from habitable land becoming submerged, obliging the residents to migrate to other areas in search of safety and sustenance.

Through Norman Myers of Oxford University, it is estimated that the number of people displaced due to climate change may go as high as 200 million by the year 2050—a huge number that shows urgency in dealing with this critical issue. Since 2008, over 318 million people have been displaced because of climate disasters; this is the equivalent of one person being displaced every second. However, these migrants remain overshadowed by other international refugee issues, with no recognition at all in the 1951 Refugee Convention, limited international coordination, and no channels for addressing their plight.

While global leaders debate emissions targets and climate financing, climate refugees are the unseen victims of our warming world—people who contribute the least to greenhouse gas emissions (such as South Asia) are most affected by them. There is an urgent, humane, and forward-looking need to recognize these communities, their protection, and their support before their suffering morphs into what can become one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the 21st century.

Impact of Climate Crisis and Migration in Pakistan

It has made devastating impacts on environmental disasters, which are on the rise. Much more devastation is expected in the coming years. Floods, droughts, and rising temperatures are some of the effects of climate change, which have brought an alarming increase in disasters that all spell doom for Pakistan. Natural disasters like floods have destroyed large areas, displaced millions, and severely affected agriculture, infrastructure, and even livelihoods. As in 2010, 2011, and most recently in 2025, the floods have caused catastrophic havoc for the people, flooding tens of thousands of square kilometers, disrupting food production, and forcing people to migrate.

In the year 2022, much of the destruction witnessed by the Balochistan province was concerning rainfall; that is, the province received 590% more than the average rainfall for the entire year, while Sindh got a rainfall increase of 726% compared to the annual average. Hence, the gravity of the issue of climate displacement becomes clearer.

Urban migration becomes the only option for many rural populations with no employment opportunities, and thus becomes a socioeconomic issue due to climate change, apart from being simply an environmental issue in consequence. With the economy scarce and infrastructure already fragile, Pakistan cannot cope with these climate migrants. The research on the relationship between climate change and migration must be able to design resilient communities and future-informed adaptive policies for climate action.

Flood Disasters: Rising Sea Levels and Coastal Communities

Rising sea levels represent a significant danger to Pakistan's coastlines, specifically Sindh and Balochistan. The average rate of sea level rise is less than 1 millimeter per year; however, the melting of the Arctic ice results in a much higher sea level rise in Pakistan that threatens cities such as Karachi, which houses over 20 million people. Pakistan's climate change index is at 87.83%. Entire communities are losing their homes as coastal erosion and saltwater intrusion make them uninhabitable and destroy livelihoods in the Indus Delta. If global temperatures remain high, a large portion of the coastline of Pakistan will be underwater by the end of the century, resulting in millions of displaced people.

Government Policies on Climate Displacement

The symptoms of climate change, particularly among disaster-hit communities, have become alarmingly evident in recent years, and Pakistan is one of the unfortunate countries at the forefront. Flooding—as a result of strange monsoon patterns—has displaced millions and has given impetus to long-term resettlement measures by the government to enhance vulnerability reduction. One such policy endeavor is the creation of model villages in Muzaffargarh district, Punjab, where families are shifted from flood-prone areas. The studies evaluating these resettlement ventures indicate a mixed success scenario and an ongoing challenge.

The reduced exposure vulnerability due to resettlement is evidenced by the relocation of communities to well-planned housing into which basic infrastructure and services such as water and sanitation have been provided. Some impactful areas that these positive indicators contributed to, such as health co-housing of communities, government subsidies, and their formalization, have not brought all forms of vulnerability down. Resettled households have undergone social dislocation, employment loss, and increased economic pressure following relocation. Social networks have been disrupted, and few employment opportunities exist in new areas.

This thus calls for comprehensive, multidimensional policies that are above and beyond physical safety to include provisions for sustainable livelihoods, economic resilience, as well as social cohesion for these populations displaced through climate change. Strategic and long-term monitoring is essential for truly climate-resilient resettlement policies.

The Socio-Economic Implications of Migration Due to Climate Change

Climate-induced migration is a phenomenon that manifests itself in the most visible way in the global scenario and has quite a complex global economic and social meaning. Environmental pressure— those rising sea levels, extreme flooding, and extreme weather events— continue to drive millions of people out of their homes, searching for safer and more sustainable modes of living. According to projections, by 2060, some 9.7 million people may migrate from climate-affected areas in Bangladesh alone. This is forecasted because of not only climatic changes but also existing socio-economic constraints, such as poverty, overpopulation, and non-resilient localities.

Many argue that the framework for forced migration arising from climate change depicts humanitarian crises, but can indeed be an adaptation strategy. When well-managed, migration would expose people to hazards posed by the climate and generate additional income through remittances that would be useful in cushioning households against economic shocks and preparing them for future disasters. Migrant networks also usually lower financial barriers to migration for others, thus increasing mobility for economically disadvantaged populations.

However, there is an unequal sharing of the benefits of migration due to climate change. Migrants tend to have job precariousness and a loss of their established social support systems, combined with limited access to housing and other services in the urban or host area. This socio-economic pressure can often displace vulnerabilities from one locale to another unless it comes with policy intervention of the inclusion variety.

Governments must build policies that assure safe, dignified, and economically viable migration that will maximize the adaptive potential of migration. The society must invest in climate-resilient infrastructure, social safety nets, skills training, and community integration initiatives—all aimed at making migration an instrument for resilience and not a last resort. These proactive policy responses will further promote the transformation of a narrative of crisis around migration into that of opportunity and adaptation as climate change continues to develop demographic flows across the globe.

The Need for an Urgent Response to the Climate Crisis

In that sense, the climate crisis poses the most immediate question for humankind: aspects of life that are visible as displaced communities— also called climate refugees— who leave homes not through free choice but through lack of global action. From the submerged coasts of small island nations to the ever-increasing floodplains of Pakistan, these are among the world's most vulnerable individuals, yet they are invisible in international law and lack representation in the policy discourse.

The displacement that major climate change creates should be a salient issue on Pakistan's agenda, with mounting climate disasters, from flash floods to encroaching sea levels. The resettlement initiatives of the government are laudable, but they create comprehensive policies where physical safety is coupled with socio-economic opportunities, social cohesion, and long-term resilience.

Climate-induced migration is generally one chance for adaptive action, not merely a humanitarian crisis case. This could make all the difference, where strong policies, inclusive planning, and solidarity at a global level will finally lead to resilience and sustainability in both source and destination communities. Ignoring this emergent reality (as Trump ignores it, nyt) would border on manufacturing a humanitarian emergency beyond control.

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